

EXCHANGING PERSPECTIVES

The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

At the outset of his reply to Ulrich Beck in this symposium, Bruno Latour cites a case study of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and repeats an anecdote he tells about Amerindians and conquistadors talking at cross-purposes. Latour deploys the story to illustrate his claim that even the most well-intentioned and sophisticated peacemakers can get us into worse trouble than we were in when negotiations began. The problem, he says, is that the likelihood is low that either side in a communication, let alone a formal negotiation, knows what the other side thinks is under discussion. Negotiating contradictory opinions may seem difficult enough, but in cases of deep enmity, opinions are not what is at stake. The disagreements are ontological: enemies disagree, as Latour cites Viveiros de Castro saying, about what world we inhabit. And when peace is achieved, it does not consist in agreement to a set of opinions or principles; the parties begin, rather, to live in a different world. The article that follows is not the one to which Latour refers but a later and related paper, appearing here in English for the first time. It has already been published, in a somewhat different version, in Italian and for an anthropological audience. It was not written for this symposium, in other words, and does not directly respond to either Latour or Beck; but Viveiros de Castro has revised the article for inclusion here, and its relevance should be immediately apparent.

—Editor

My subject is the cosmological setting of an indigenous Amazonian model of the self.¹ I will examine two major contexts, shamanism and warfare, in which “self” and “other” develop especially complex relations. Shamanism deals with the relation between humans and nonhumans; and in warfare, a human other, an “enemy,” is used to bring a “self” into existence. I will deliberately use a set of traditional dichotomies (I mean, in the tradition of modernity) as both heuristic instruments and foils: nature/culture, subject/object, production/exchange, and so forth. This very crude technique for setting off the distinctive features of Amazonian cosmologies carries the obvious risk of distortion, since it is unlikely that any nonmodern cosmology can be adequately described either by means of such conceptual polarities or as a simple negation of them (as if the only point of a nonmodern cosmology were to stand in opposition to our oppositions). But the technique does have the advantage of showing how unstable and problematic those polarities can be made to appear, once they have been forced to bear “unnatural” interpretations and unexpected rearrangements.

Perspectival Multinaturalism

If there is one virtually universal Amerindian notion, it is that of an original state of nondifferentiation between humans and animals, as described in mythology. Myths are filled with beings whose form, name, and behavior inextricably mix human and animal attributes in a common context of intercommunicability, identical to that which defines the present-day intrahuman world. Amerindian myths speak of a state of being where self and other interpenetrate, submerged in the same immanent, presubjective and preobjective milieu, the end of which is precisely what the mythology sets out to tell. This end is, of course, the well-known separation of “culture” and “nature”—of human and nonhuman—that Claude Lévi-Strauss has shown to be the central theme of Amerindian mythology and which he deems to be a cultural universal.²

In some respects, the Amerindian separation between humans and animals may be seen as an analogue of our “nature/culture” distinction; there is, however, at least one crucial difference between the Amerindian and modern, popular Western versions. In the former case, the separation was not brought about by

1. Hypotheses that I have offered previously (“Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, n.s., 4:3 [1998]: 469–88) are rehearsed here since they ground the argument of this article. I gave an early version of the present paper, in English, at the Chicago meeting of the American Anthropological Association in November 1999, and that version was subsequently published in Italian as “La trasformazione degli oggetti in sogetti nelle ontologie amerindi-

ane,” *Etnosistemi* 7:7 (2000): 47–58. The title of that paper (a version of which is the subtitle of this essay) pays homage to Nancy Munn, “The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjara Myth,” in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, ed. Ronald M. Berndt (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1970).

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, 4 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1964–71).

a process of differentiating the human from the animal, as in our own evolutionist “scientific” mythology. For Amazonian peoples, *the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity*. The great separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature as nature distancing itself from culture: the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans. Humans are those who continue as they have always been. *Animals are ex-humans (rather than humans, ex-animals)*. In some cases, humankind is the substance of the primordial plenum or the original form of virtually everything, not just animals. As Gerald Weiss puts it:

Campa mythology is largely the story of how, one by one, the primal Campa became irreversibly transformed into the first representatives of various species of animals and plants, as well as astronomical bodies or features of the terrain. . . . The development of the universe, then, has been primarily a process of diversification, with mankind as the primal substance out of which many if not all of the categories of beings and things in the universe arose, the Campa of today being the descendants of those ancestral Campa who escaped being transformed.³

The fact that many “natural” species or entities were originally human has important consequences for the present-day state of the world. While our folk anthropology holds that humans have an original animal nature that must be coped with by culture—having been wholly animals, we remain animals “at bottom”—Amerindian thought holds that, having been human, animals must still be human, albeit in an unapparent way. Thus, many animal species, as well as sundry other types of nonhuman beings, are supposed to have a spiritual component that qualifies them as “people.” Such a notion is often associated with the idea that the manifest bodily form of each species is an envelope (a “clothing”) that conceals an internal humanoid form, usually visible to the eyes of only the particular species and of “transspecific” beings such as shamans. This internal form is the soul or spirit of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness. If we conceive of humans as somehow composed of a cultural clothing that hides and controls an essentially animal nature, Amazonians have it the other way around: animals have a human, sociocultural inner aspect that is “disguised” by an ostensibly bestial bodily form.

Another important consequence of having animals and other types of nonhumans conceived as people—as kinds of humans—is that the relations between the human species and most of what we would call “nature” take on the quality of what we would term “social relations.” Thus, categories of relationship and modes of interaction prevailing in the intrahuman world are also in force in most

3. Gerald Weiss, “Campa Cosmology,” *Ethnology* 11.2 (April 1972): 169–70.

contexts in which humans and nonhumans confront each other. Cultivated plants may be conceived as blood relatives of the women who tend them, game animals may be approached by hunters as affines, shamans may relate to animal and plant spirits as associates or enemies.

Having been people, animals and other species continue to be people behind their everyday appearance. This idea is part of an indigenous theory according to which the different sorts of persons—human and nonhuman (animals, spirits, the dead, denizens of other cosmic layers, plants, occasionally even objects and artifacts)—apprehend reality from distinct points of view. The way that humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans (and see themselves). Under normal conditions, humans see humans as humans; they see animals as animals, plants as plants. As for spirits, to see these usually invisible beings is a sure sign that conditions are not normal. On the other hand, animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as game or prey) to the same extent that game animals see humans as spirits or as predator animals. By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or they become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages; and, most important, they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture. Animals see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish); they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks) as body decorations or cultural instruments; they see their social system as organized in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moieties, and whatnot).

The contrast with our conceptions in the modern West is, again, only too clear. Such divergence invites us to imagine an ontology I have called “multinaturalist” so as to set it off from modern “multiculturalist” ontologies.⁴ Where the latter are founded on the mutually implied unity of nature and multiplicity of cultures—the former guaranteed by the objective universality of body and substance, the latter generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning—the Amerindian conception presumes a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity. For them, culture or the subject is the form of the universal, while nature or the object is the form of the particular.

To say that humanity is the original common condition of humans and nonhumans alike is tantamount to saying that the soul or spirit—the subjective aspect of being—is the universal, unconditioned given (since the souls of all nonhumans are humanlike), while objective bodily nature takes on an a posteriori, particular, and conditioned quality. In this connection, it is also worth noticing that the notion of matter as a universal substrate seems wholly absent from Ama-

4. See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis.” Bruno Latour, *Politiques de la nature* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999), and, of course, his contribution to this symposium. For a generalization of the notion of “multinaturalism,” see

zonian ontologies.⁵ Reflexive selfhood, not material objectivity, is the potential common ground of being.

To say, then, that animals and spirits are people is to say that they are persons; and to personify them is to attribute to nonhumans the capacities of conscious intentionality and social agency that define the position of the subject.⁶ Such capacities are reified in the soul or spirit with which these nonhumans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is capable of having a point of view, and every being to whom a point of view is attributed is a subject; or better, wherever there is a point of view, there is a “subject position.” Our constructionist epistemology can be summed up in the Saussurean (and very Kantian) formula, “the point of view creates the object.”⁷ The subject, in other words, is the original, fixed condition whence the point of view emanates (the subject creates the point of view). Whereas Amerindian perspectival ontology proceeds as though *the point of view creates the subject*: whatever is activated or “agented” by the point of view will be a subject.

The attribution of humanlike consciousness and intentionality (to say nothing of human bodily form and cultural habits) to nonhuman beings has been indiscriminately termed “anthropocentrism” or “anthropomorphism.” However, these two labels can be taken to denote radically opposed cosmological perspectives. Western popular evolutionism, for instance, is thoroughly anthropocentric but not particularly anthropomorphic. On the other hand, animism may be characterized as anthropomorphic but definitely not as anthropocentric: if sundry other beings besides humans are “human,” then we humans are not a special lot (so much for “primitive narcissism”).

Karl Marx wrote of man, meaning *Homo sapiens*:

In creating an objective world by his practical activity, in working-up inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being. . . . Admittedly animals also produce. . . . But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, while man produces universally. . . . An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. . . . An animal forms things in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance to the standards of other species.⁸

Talk about primitive narcissism. . . . Whatever Marx meant by the proposition that man “produces universally,” I fancy he was saying something to the effect

5. But see Anne Osborn, “Comer y ser comido: Los animales en la tradicion oral U’wa (tunebo),” *Boletin del Museo del Oro* 26 (1990): 13–41.

6. Animals and other nonhumans are subjects not because they are human (humans in disguise); rather, they are human because they are subjects (potential subjects).

7. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916; Paris: Payot, 1981), 23.

8. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 75–76.

that man is the universal animal: an intriguing idea. (If man is the universal animal, then perhaps each animal species would be a particular kind of humanity?) While apparently converging with the Amerindian notion that humanity is the universal form of the subject, Marx's is in fact an absolute inversion of the notion. Marx is saying that humans can be any animal (we have more "being" than any other species), while Amerindians say that any animal can be human (there is more "being" to an animal than meets the eye). Man is the universal animal in two entirely different senses, then: the universality is anthropocentric for Marx; anthropomorphic, for Amerindians.

The Subjectification of Objects

Much of the Amerindians' practical engagement with the world presupposes that present-day nonhuman beings have a spiritual, invisible, prosopomorphic side. That supposition is foregrounded in the context of shamanism. By shamanism, I mean the capacity evinced by some individuals to cross ontological boundaries deliberately and adopt the perspective of nonhuman subjectivities in order to administer the relations between humans and nonhumans. Being able to see nonhumans as they see themselves (they see themselves as humans), shamans are able to take on the role of active interlocutors in transspecific dialogues and are capable (unlike lay persons) of returning to tell the tale. If a human who is not a shaman happens to see a nonhuman (an animal, a dead human soul, a spirit) in human form, he or she runs the risk of being overpowered by the nonhuman subjectivity, of passing over to its side and being transformed into an animal, a dead human, a spirit. A meeting or exchange of perspectives is, in brief, a dangerous business.

Shamanism is a form of acting that presupposes a mode of knowing, a particular ideal of knowledge. That ideal is, in many respects, the exact opposite of the objectivist folk epistemology of our tradition. In the latter, the category of the object supplies the telos: to know is to objectify—that is, to be able to distinguish what is inherent to the object from what belongs to the knowing subject and has been unduly (or inevitably) projected into the object. To know, then, is to *desubjectify*, to make explicit the subject's partial presence in the object so as to reduce it to an ideal minimum. In objectivist epistemology, subjects as much as objects are seen as the result of a process of objectification. The subject constitutes/recognizes itself in the objects it produces, and the subject knows itself objectively when it comes to see itself from the outside as an "it." Objectification is the name of our game; what is not objectified remains unreal and abstract. The form of the other is *the thing*.

Amerindian shamanism is guided by the opposite ideal. To know is to personify, to take on the point of view of that which must be known. Shamanic knowledge aims at something that is a someone—another subject. The form of the other is *the person*. What I am defining here is what anthropologists of yore

used to call animism, an attitude that is far more than an idle metaphysical tenet, for the attribution of souls to animals and other so-called natural beings entails a specific way of dealing with them. Being conscious subjects able to communicate with humans, these natural beings are able fully to reciprocate the intentional stance that humans adopt with respect to them.

Recently, there has been a new surge of interest in animism.⁹ Cognitive anthropologists and psychologists have been arguing that animism is an “innate” cognitive attitude that has been naturally selected for its attention-grabbing potential and its practical predictive value.¹⁰ I have no quarrel with these hypotheses. Whatever the grounds of its naturalness, however, animism can also be very much cultural—that is, animism can be put to systematic and deliberate use. We must observe that Amerindians do not spontaneously see animals and other non-humans as persons; the personhood or subjectivity of the latter is considered a nonevident aspect of them. It is necessary *to know how* to personify nonhumans, and it is necessary to personify them in *order to know*.¹¹

Personification or subjectification implies that the “intentional stance” adopted with respect to the world has been in some way universalized. Instead of reducing intentionality to obtain a perfectly objective picture of the world, animism makes the inverse epistemological bet. True (shamanic) knowledge aims to reveal a maximum of intentionality or abduct a maximum of agency (here I am using Alfred Gell’s vocabulary).¹² A good interpretation, then, would be one able to understand every *event* as in truth an *action*, an expression of intentional states or predicates of some subject. Interpretive success is directly proportional to the ordinal magnitude of intentionality that the knower is able to attribute to the known.¹³ A thing or a state of affairs that is not amenable to subjectification—to

9. See especially Philippe Descola, “Constructing Natures: Symbolic Ecology and Social Practice,” in *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Descola and Gísli Pálsson (London: Routledge, 1996), 82–102; and Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40, supp. (February 1999): 67–91.

10. See Pascal Boyer, “What Makes Anthropomorphism Natural: Intuitive Ontology and Cultural Representations,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, n.s., 2, 1 (March 1996): 83–97; and Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

11. “The same convention requires that the objects of interpretation—human or not—become understood as other persons; indeed, the very act of interpretation presupposes the personhood of what is being interpreted.... What one thus encounters in making interpretations are always counter-interpretations.” Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance, and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London: Athlone, 1999), 239.

12. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

13. I am referring here to Daniel Dennett’s idea of *n*-order intentional systems: a second-order intentional system is one to which the observer must ascribe not only beliefs, desires, and other intentions, but beliefs (etc.) *about* other beliefs (etc.). The standard cognitive thesis holds that only humans exhibit second- or higher-order intentionality. My shamanistic “principle of abduction of a maximum of agency” runs afoul of the creed of physicalist psychology: “Psychologists have often appealed to a principle known as Lloyd Morgan’s Canon of Parsimony, which can be viewed as a special case of Occam’s Razor: it is the principle that one should attribute to an organism as little intelligence or consciousness or rationality or mind as will suffice to account for its behaviour.” Daniel Dennett, *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1978), 274.

determination of its social relation to the knower—is shamanistically uninteresting. Our objectivist epistemology follows the opposite course: it considers our commonsense intentional stance as just a shorthand that we use when the behavior of a target-object is too complicated to be broken down into elementary physical processes. An exhaustive scientific interpretation of the world would for us be able ideally to reduce every action to a chain of causal events and to reduce these events to materially dense interactions (with no “action at a distance”).¹⁴

If in the naturalist view a subject is an insufficiently analyzed object, in the Amerindian animist cosmology the converse holds: *an object is an incompletely interpreted subject*. The object must either be “expanded” to a full-fledged subject—a spirit; an animal in its human, reflexive form—or else understood as related to a subject (as existing, in Gell’s terms, “in the neighbourhood” of an agent). But an important qualification must now be made: Amerindian cosmologies do not as a rule attribute personhood (or the same degree of personhood) to each type of entity in the world. In the case of animals, for instance, the emphasis seems to be on those species that perform key symbolic and practical roles, such as the great predators and the principal species of prey for humans. Personhood and “perspectivity”—the capacity to occupy a point of view—is a question of degree and context rather than an absolute, diacritical property of particular species.

Still, despite this qualification, what cannot be conceived as a primary agent or subject in its own right must be traced up to one:

“Social agents” can be drawn from categories which are as different as chalk and cheese . . . because “social agency” is not defined in terms of “basic” biological attributes (such as inanimate thing vs. incarnate person) but is relational—it does not matter, in ascribing “social agent” status, what a thing (or a person) “is” in itself; what matters is where it stands in a network of social relations. All that may be necessary for stocks and stones to become “social agents” . . . is that there should be actual human persons/agents “in the neighbourhood” of these inert objects.¹⁵

Though there are Amazonian cosmologies that deny to postmythical non-human species any spiritual dimension, the notion (widespread, as is well known, throughout the continent) of animal or plant “spirit masters” supplies the missing agency. These spirit masters, equipped with an intentionality fully equivalent

14. Cf. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), 355: “La pensée sauvage est logique, dans le même sens et de la même façon que la nôtre, mais comme l'est seulement la nôtre quand elle s'applique à la connaissance d'un univers auquel elle reconnaît simultanément des propriétés physiques et des propriétés sémantiques.”

15. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 123.

to that of humans, function as hypostases of the species with which they are associated, thereby creating an intersubjective field for human/nonhuman relations even where empirical nonhuman species are not spiritualized. Moreover, the idea that nonhuman agents experience themselves and their behavior in the forms of (human) culture plays a crucial role: translating culture into the terms of alien subjectivities transforms many natural objects and events into indices from which social agency is derivable. The commonest case is that of defining what to humans is a brute fact or object as an artifact or cultured behavior: what is blood to us is manioc beer to jaguars, a muddy waterhole is seen by tapirs as a great ceremonial house. Artifacts have this interestingly ambiguous ontology. They are objects that necessarily point to a subject; as congealed actions, they are material embodiments of nonmaterial intentionality. What is nature to us may well be culture to another species.

Perspectivism Is Not Relativism

The idea of a world comprising a multiplicity of subject positions looks very much like a form of relativism. Or rather, relativism under its various definitions is often implied in the ethnographic characterization of Amerindian cosmologies. Take, for instance, the work of Kaj Århem, the ethnographer of the Makuna. Having described the elaborate perspectival universe of this Tukanoan people of northwestern Amazonia, Århem observes that the notion of multiple viewpoints on reality implies that, as far as the Makuna are concerned, “every perspective is equally valid and true” and that “a correct and true representation of the world does not exist.”¹⁶ Århem is right, of course; but only in a sense. For one can reasonably surmise that as far as humans are concerned, the Makuna would say that there is indeed only one correct and true representation of the world. If *you* start seeing, for instance, the maggots in rotten meat as grilled fish, you may be sure that you are in deep trouble, but grilled fish they are from the *vultures’* point of view. Perspectives should be kept separate. Only shamans, who are so to speak species-androgynous, can make perspectives communicate, and then only under special, controlled conditions.

My real point, however, is best put as a question: does the Amerindian perspectivist theory posit, as Århem maintains that it does, a multiplicity of *representations* of the same world? It is sufficient to consider ethnographic evidence to see that the opposite is the case: all beings perceive (“represent”) the world *in the*

16. Kaj Århem, “Ecosofía Makuna,” in *La selva humanaizada: Ecología alternativa en el trópico húmedo colombiano*, ed. François Correa (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología; Fondo FEN Colombia; Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1993), 124.

same way. What varies is the *world* that they see. Animals impose the same categories and values on reality as humans do—their worlds, like ours, revolve around hunting and fishing, cooking and fermented drinks, cross-cousins and war, initiation rituals, shamans, chiefs, spirits, and so forth. Being people in their own sphere, nonhumans see things just *as* people do. But the things *that* they see are different. Again, what to us is blood is maize beer to the jaguar; what to us is soaking manioc is, to the souls of the dead, a rotting corpse; what is a muddy waterhole to us is for the tapirs a great ceremonial house.

Another good discussion of Amazonian “relativism” can be found in a study of the Matsiguenga by France-Marie Renard-Casevitz. Commenting on a myth in which the human protagonists travel to villages inhabited by strange people who call the snakes, bats, and balls of fire that they eat by the names of foods (“fish,” “agouti,” “macaws”) appropriate for human consumption, she realizes that indigenous perspectivism is quite different from relativism. Yet she sees no special problem:

This setting in perspective [*mise en perspective*] is just the application and transposition of universal social practices, such as the fact that a mother and a father of X are the parents-in-law of Y. . . . This variability of the denomination as a function of the place occupied explains how A can be both fish for X and snake for Y.¹⁷

But applying the positional relativity that obtains in social and cultural terms to the difference between species has a paradoxical consequence: Matsiguenga preferences are universalized and made absolute. A human culture is thus rendered natural—everybody eats fish and nobody eats snake.

Be that as it may, Casevitz’s analogy between kinship positions and what counts as fish or snake for different species remains intriguing. Kinship terms are relational pointers; they belong to the class of nouns that define something in terms of its relations to something else (linguists have special names for such nouns—“two-place predicates” and such like). Concepts like fish or tree, on the other hand, are proper, self-contained substantives: they are applied to an object by virtue of its intrinsic properties. Now, what seems to be happening in Amerindian perspectivism is that substances named by substantives like *fish*, *snake*, *hammock*, or *beer* are somehow used as if they were relational pointers, something halfway between a noun and a pronoun, a substantive and a deictic. (There is supposedly a difference between “natural kind” terms such as *fish* and “artifact” terms such as *hammock*: a subject worth more discussion later.) You are a father only

17. France-Marie Renard-Casevitz, *Le banquet masqué: Une mythologie de l’étranger chez les indiens Matsiguenga* (Paris: Lierre and Coudrier, 1991), 29.

because there is another person whose father you are. Fatherhood is a relation, while fishiness is an intrinsic property of fish. In Amerindian perspectivism, however, something is a fish only by virtue of someone else whose fish it is.

But if saying that crickets are the fish of the dead or that mud is the hammock of tapirs is like saying that my sister Isabel's son, Miguel, is my nephew, then there is no relativism involved. Isabel is not a mother "for" Miguel, from Miguel's "point of view" in the usual, relativist-subjectivist sense of the expression. Isabel is the mother *of* Miguel, she is really and objectively Miguel's mother, just as I am really Miguel's uncle. This is a genitive, internal relation (my sister is the mother of someone, our cricket the fish of someone) and not a representational, external connection of the type "X is fish for someone," which implies that X is "represented" as fish, whatever X is "in itself." It would be absurd to say that, since Miguel is the son of Isabel but not mine, then Miguel is not a son "for me"—for indeed he is. He is my sister's son, precisely.

Now imagine that all Amerindian substances were of this sort. Suppose that, as siblings are those who have the same parents, conspecifics are those that have the same fish, the same snake, the same hammock, and so forth. No wonder, then, that animals are so often conceived, in Amazonia, as affinely related to humans. Blood is to humans as manioc beer is to jaguars in exactly the way that my sister is the wife of my brother-in-law. The many Amerindian myths featuring interspecific marriages and discussing the difficult relationships between the human (or animal) in-marrying affine and his or her animal (or human) parents-in-law, simply compound the two analogies into a single complex one. We begin to see how perspectivism may have a deep connection with exchange—not only how it may be a type of exchange, but how any exchange is by definition an exchange of perspectives.¹⁸

We would thus have a universe that is 100 percent relational—a universe in which there would be no distinctions between primary and secondary qualities of substances or between "brute facts" and "institutional facts." This distinction, championed by John Searle, opposes brute facts or objects, the reality of which is independent of human consciousness (gravity, mountains, trees, animals, and all "natural kinds") to institutional facts or objects (marriage, money, axes, and cars) that derive their existence, identity, and efficacy from the culturally specific meanings given them by humans.¹⁹ In this overhauled version of the nature/culture dualism, the terms of cultural relativism apply only to cultural objects and are balanced by the terms of natural universalism, which apply to nat-

18. See Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and "Writing Societies, Writing Persons," *History of the Human Sciences* 5.1 (February 1992): 5–16.

19. John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Allen Lane, 1995).

ural objects. Searle would argue, I suppose, that what I am saying is that for Amerindians all facts are of the institutional, mental variety, and that all objects, even trees and fish, are like money or hammocks, in that their only reality (as money and hammocks, not as pieces of paper or of string) derives from the meanings and uses that subjects attribute to them. This would be nothing but relativism, Searle would observe—and an absolute form of relativism at that.

An implication of Amerindian perspectivist animism is, indeed, that there are no autonomous, natural facts, for what we see as nature is seen by other species as culture (as institutional facts). What humans see as blood, a natural substance, is seen by jaguars as manioc beer, an artifact. But such institutional facts are taken to be universal, culturally invariable (an impossibility according to Searle). Constructionist relativism defines all facts as institutional and thus culturally variable. We have here a case not of relativism but universalism—cultural universalism—that has as its complement what has been called “natural relativism.”²⁰ And it is this inversion of our usual pairing of nature with the universal and culture with the particular that I have been terming “perspectivism.”

Cultural (multicultural) relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations. Amerindian thought proposes the opposite: a representational or phenomenological unity that is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. One culture, multiple natures—one epistemology, multiple ontologies. Perspectivism implies multinaturalism, for a perspective is not a representation. A perspective is not a representation because representations are a property of the mind or spirit, whereas the point of view is located in the body. The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul, and nonhumans are subjects in so far as they have (or are) spirit; but the differences between viewpoints (and a viewpoint is nothing if not a difference) lies not in the soul. Since the soul is formally identical in all species, it can only perceive the same things everywhere. The difference is given in the specificity of bodies.

This formulation permits me to provide answers to a couple of questions that may have already occurred to my readers. If nonhumans are persons and have souls, then what distinguishes them from humans? And why, being people, do they not regard us as people?

Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies differ from ours. I am not referring to physiological differences—Amerindians recognize a basic uniformity of bodies—but rather to *affects*, in the old sense of dispositions or capacities that render the body of each species unique: what it eats,

20. See Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), 144.

how it moves, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary. The visible shape of the body is a powerful sign of these affectual differences, although the shape can be deceptive, since a human appearance could, for example, be concealing a jaguar affect. Thus, what I call “body” is not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; body is in this sense an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*. Between the formal subjectivity of souls and the substantial materiality of organisms, there is thus an intermediate plane occupied by the body as a bundle of affects and capacities. And the body is the origin of perspectives.

Solipsism or Cannibalism

The status of humans in modern thought is essentially ambiguous. On the one hand, humankind is an animal species among other such, and animality is a domain that includes humans; on the other hand, humanity is a moral condition that excludes animals.²¹ These two statuses coexist in the problematic and disjunctive notion of “human nature.” In other words, our cosmology postulates a physical continuity and a metaphysical discontinuity between humans and animals, the continuity making of humankind an object for the natural sciences and the discontinuity making of humanity an object for the humanities. Spirit or mind is the great differentiator: it raises us above animals and matter in general, it distinguishes cultures, it makes each person unique before his or her fellow beings. The body, in contrast, is the major integrator: it connects us to the rest of the living, united by a universal substrate (DNA, carbon chemistry) that, in turn, links up with the ultimate nature of all material bodies. Conversely, Amerindians postulate metaphysical continuity and physical discontinuity. The metaphysical continuity results in animism; the physical discontinuity (between the beings of the cosmos), in perspectivism. The spirit or soul (here, a reflexive form, not an immaterial inner substance) integrates. Whereas the body (here, a system of intensive affects, not an extended material organism) differentiates.²²

This cosmological picture, which understands bodies as the great differ-

²¹. See Tim Ingold, “Becoming Persons: Consciousness and Sociality in Human Evolution,” *Cultural Dynamics* 4-3 (1991): 355–78; and Ingold, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture, and Social Life*, s.v. “Humanity and Animality.”

²². The counterproof of the singularity of the spirit in modern cosmologies lies in the fact that when we try to universalize it, we are obliged—now that supernature is out of bounds—to identify it with the structure and function of the brain. The spirit can only be universal (natural) if it is (in) the body. It is no accident, I believe, that this

movement of inscription of the spirit in the brain-body or in matter in general—AI, Churchland’s “eliminative materialism,” Dennett-style “functionalism,” Sperberian cognitivism, etc.—has been synchronically countered by its opposite, the neophenomenological appeal to the body as the site of subjective singularity. Thus, we have been witnessing two seemingly contradictory projects of “embodiment” the spirit: one actually reducing it to the body as traditionally (i.e., biophysically) understood, the other upgrading the body to the traditional (i.e., cultural-theological) status of “spirit.”

entiators, at the same time posits their inherent transformability: interspecific metamorphosis is a fact of nature. Not only is metamorphosis the standard etiological process in myth, but it is still very much possible in present-day life (being either desirable or undesirable, inevitable or evitable, according to circumstances). Spirits, the dead, and shamans can assume animal form, beasts turn into other beasts, humans inadvertently turn into animals. No surprises here: our own cosmology presumes a singular distinctiveness of minds but not even for this reason does it hold communication to be impossible (albeit solipsism is a constant problem). Nor does our cosmology discredit the mental/spiritual transformations induced by such processes as education and religious conversion. Indeed, it is because the spiritual is the locus of difference that conversion becomes a necessary idea. Bodily metamorphosis is the Amerindian counterpart to the European theme of spiritual conversion. Shamans are transformers (and likewise, the mythical demigods who transformed primal humans into animals are themselves shamans). Shamans can see animals in their inner human form because they don animal “clothing” and thus transform themselves into animals.

Solipsism and metamorphosis are related in the same way. Solipsism is the phantom that threatens our cosmology, raising the fear that we will not recognize ourselves in our “own kind” because, given the potentially absolute singularity of minds, our “own kind” are actually not like us. The possibility of metamorphosis expresses the fear—the opposite fear—of no longer being able to differentiate between human and animal, and above all the fear of seeing the human who lurks within the body of the animal that one eats. Our traditional problem in the West is how to connect and universalize: individual substances are given, while relations have to be made. The Amerindian problem is how to separate and particularize: relations are given, while substances must be defined.

Hence the importance, in Amazonia, of dietary rules linked to the spiritual potency of animals. The past humanity of animals is added to their present-day spirituality, and both are hidden by their visible form. The result is an extended set of food restrictions or precautions that declare inedible animals that were, in myth, originally consubstantial with humans—though some animals can be desubjectified by shamanic means and then consumed.²³ Violation of food restrictions exposes the violator to illness, conceived of as a cannibal counter-predation undertaken by the spirit of the prey (turned predator) in a lethal inversion of perspectives that transforms human into animal. Thus cannibalism is the Amerindian parallel to our own phantom—solipsism. The solipsist is uncertain whether the natural similarity of bodies guarantees a real community of spirit.

23. Desubjectification is accomplished by neutralizing the spirit, transubstantiating the meat into plant food, or semantically reducing the animal subject to a species less proximate to humans.

Whereas the cannibal suspects that the similarity of souls prevails over real differences of body and thus that all animals eaten, despite efforts to desubjectivize them, remain human. To say that these uncertainties or suspicions are phantoms haunting their respective cultures does not mean, of course, that there are not solipsists among us (the more radical relativists, for instance), nor that there are not Amerindian societies that are purposefully and more or less literally cannibalistic.

Exchange as Transformation

The idea of creation ex nihilo is virtually absent from indigenous cosmogonies. Things and beings normally originate as a transformation of something else: animals, as I have noted, are transformations of a primordial, universal humanity. Where we find notions of creation at all—the fashioning of some prior substance into a new type of being—what is stressed is the imperfection of the end product. Amerindian demiurges always fail to deliver the goods. And just as nature is the result not of creation but of transformation, so culture is a product not of invention but of transference (and thus transmission, tradition). In Amerindian mythology, the origin of cultural implements or institutions is canonically explained as a borrowing—a transfer (violent or friendly, by stealing or by learning, as a trophy or as a gift) of prototypes already possessed by animals, spirits, or enemies. The origin and essence of culture is acculturation.

The idea of creation/invention belongs to the paradigm of production: production is a weak version of creation but, at the same time, is its model. Both are actions in—or rather, upon and against—the world. Production is the imposition of mental design on inert, formless matter. The idea of transformation/transfer belongs to the paradigm of exchange: an exchange event is always the transformation of a prior exchange event. There is no absolute beginning, no absolutely initial act of exchange. Every act is a response: that is, a transformation of an anterior token of the same type. *Poiesis*, creation/production/invention, is our archetypal model for action; *praxis*, which originally meant something like transformation/exchange/transfer, suits the Amerindian and other nonmodern worlds better.²⁴ The exchange model of action supposes that the subject’s “other” is another subject (not an object); and subjectification is, of course, what perspectivism is all about.²⁵ In the creation paradigm, production is causally primary; and exchange, its encompassed consequence. Exchange is a “moment” of

²⁴. From the point of view of a hypothetical Amerindian philosopher, I would say that the Western obsession with production reveals it as the last avatar of the biblico-theological category of creation. Humans were not only created in the likeness of God, they create after His own

image: they “produce.” Ever since God “died,” humans have produced themselves after *their* own image (and that is what culture is about, I suppose).

²⁵. See Strathern, “Writing Societies,” 9–10.

production (it “realizes” value) and the means of *reproduction*. In the transformation paradigm, exchange is the condition for production since, without the proper social relations with nonhumans, no production is possible. Production is a type or mode of exchange, and the means of “reexchange” (a word we certainly do not need, for exchange is by definition reexchange). Production creates; exchange changes.

I would venture a further remark on this contrast: the idiom of material production, if applied outside the original domain of *poiesis*, is necessarily metaphorical. When we speak of the production of persons (social reproduction) or the production of “symbolic capital” as if we meant the production of subjects rather than simply of human organisms, we are being no less metaphorical than when we apply the idiom of *praxis* to engagements between humans and nonhumans. To speak of the production of social life makes as much, or as little, sense as to speak of an exchange between humans and animals. Metaphorical Marx is not necessarily better than metaphorical Mauss.

I would speculate, further, that the emphasis on transformation/exchange (over creation/production) is organically connected to the predominance of affinal relations (created by marriage alliance) over consanguineal ones (created by parenthood) in Amerindian mythology. The protagonists of the major Amerindian myths are related agonistically as siblings-in-law, parents-in-law, children-in-law. Our own Old World mythology (Greek, Near Eastern, or Freudian) seems haunted, on the other hand, by parenthood and especially fatherhood. Not to put too fine a point on it: we had to steal fire from a divine father; Amerindians had to steal it from an animal father-in-law. Mythology is a discourse on the given, the innate. Myths address what must be taken for granted, the initial conditions with which humanity must cope and against which humanity must define itself by means of its power of “convention.”²⁶ If such is the case, then in the Amerindian world, affinity and alliance (exchange) rather than parenthood (creation/production) comprise the given—the unconditioned condition.

The Cannibal Cogito

The analogy between shamans and warriors in Amerindian ethnographies has often been observed. Warriors are to the human world what shamans are to the universe at large: conductors or commutators of perspectives. That shamanism is warfare writ large has nothing to do with violence (though shamans often act as warriors in the literal sense). But indigenous warfare belongs to the same cos-

26. See Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

mological complex as shamanism, insofar as both involve the embodiment by the self of the enemy's point of view.²⁷ Accordingly, in Amazonia, what is intended in ritual exocannibalism is incorporation of the subjecthood of a hypersubjectified enemy. The intent is not (as it is in hunting game animals) desubjectification.

The subjectification of human enemies is a complex ritual process. Suffice it to say, for our purposes here, that the process supposes a thorough identification of the killer with its victim, just as shamans become the animals whose bodies they procure for the rest of their group. Killers derive crucial aspects of their social and metaphysical identities from their victims—names, surplus souls, songs, trophies, ritual perogatives; but in order to do so, a killer must first *become* his enemy. A telling example is the Araweté war song in which a killer repeats words taught him by the spirit of the victim during the ritual seclusion that follows the deed: the killer speaks from the enemy's standpoint, saying "I" to refer to the enemy and "him" to refer to himself.²⁸ In order to become a full subject—for the killing of an enemy is often a precondition to adult male status—the killer must apprehend the enemy "from the inside" (as a subject). The analogy with the animist perspectival theory already discussed is clear: nonhuman subjectivities see humans as nonhumans (and vice versa). Here, the killer must be able to see himself as the enemy sees him—as, precisely, an enemy—in order to become "himself" or, rather, a "myself." It is relevant in this connection to recall that the archetypal idiom of enmity, in Amazonia, is affinity. Enemies are conceptualized as "ideal" brothers-in-law, uncontaminated by the exchange of sisters (which would "consanguinize" them—make them cognates of one's children—and thus less than pure affines).

In this idiom of enmity, then, neither party is an object. Enmity of this sort is a reciprocal subjectification: an exchange, a transfer, of points of view. It is a *ritual transformation of the self* (to use Simon Harrison's term) that belongs entirely to the "exchange" (not the "production") paradigm of action—though the exchange in this case is very extreme. Harrison describes the situation in a Melanesian context that closely resembles the Amazonian: "Just as a gift embodies the identity of its donor, so in Lowland warfare the killer acquires through homicide an aspect of his victim's identity. The killing is represented as either creating or expressing a social relationship, or else as the collapse of a social relation by the *merging of two social alters into one*."²⁹ The synthesis of the gift relates subjects who remain objectively separated—they are divided by the rela-

27. See Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

29. Simon Harrison, *The Mask of War: Violence, Ritual, and the Self in Melanesia* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1993), 130.

28. See Viveiros de Castro, "Le meurtrier et son double chez les Araweté: Un exemple de fusion rituelle," *Systèmes de Pensée en Afrique Noire* 14 (1996): 77–104.

tion.³⁰ The killing of an enemy and its symbolic incorporation by the killer, on the other hand, produces a synthesis in which all distance is suppressed: the relation is created by abolishing one of its terms, which is then introjected by the other. The reciprocal dependence of exchange partners becomes inseparability here, a kind of fusion.

Ontological predation appears to be the crucial idiom of subjectification in Amazonia. The relative and relational status of predator and prey is fundamental to the inversions in perspective that obtain between humans and nonhumans. Again, the Melanesian context, as Harrison describes it, presents striking parallels to that of Amazonia: “Aggression is conceived as very much a communicative act directed against the subjectivity of others, and making war required the reduction of the enemy, not to the status of a non-person or thing but, quite the opposite, to an extreme state of subjectivity.”³¹ Which means, Harrison concludes, that enmity in these societies “is conceptualised not as a mere objective absence of a social relationship but as a definite social relationship like any other” (128). This remark brings to mind a well-known passage from Lévi-Strauss:

Les observateurs ont été souvent frappés par l'impossibilité, pour les indigènes, de concevoir une relation neutre, ou plus exactement une absence de relation . . . l'absence de relation familiale ne définit pas rien, elle définit l'hostilité . . . il n'est pas davantage possible de se tenir en deçà, ou au delà, du monde des relations.³²

“Pour les indigènes,” no difference is indifferent and must immediately be invested with positivity. Enmity is a full-blown social relationship. Not, however, a relationship like any other: I would go a bit farther than Harrison and say that the overall schema of difference in Amazonia is cannibalistic predation. At the risk of falling into allegorical excess, I would even venture to say that, in Amazonian cosmologies, the generic attributive proposition is a cannibal proposition. The copula of all synthetic a priori judgments, in a universe articulated by a “logic of sensory qualities,” is carnivorous copulation. Let me insist: these predatory relations are fully and immediately social relations. We are dealing here with a mode of subjectification, internal to the *monde des relations* to which Lévi-Strauss refers. That world has nothing to do with production and objectification, modes of action that suppose a neutral relationship in which an active and exclusively human subject confronts an inert and naturalized object. In the *monde de relations*, the self is the gift of the other.

30. See Strathern, *Gender of the Gift*.

31. Harrison, *Mask of War*, 121.

32. Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, 2d ed. (1949; La Haye: Mouton, 1967), 552–53.

Some Conclusions

Our current notions of the social are inevitably polarized by the oppositions I have been evoking: representation/reality, culture/nature, human/nonhuman, mind/body, and the rest. In particular, the social presupposes the nonsocial (the natural). It is impossible to rethink the social without rethinking the natural, for in our cosmological vulgate, nature (always in the singular) is the encompassing term, and society (often used in the plural) is the term encompassed.

The contrast between our basic naturalism and Amerindian cosmologies can be phrased in the terms of our own polarities. Animism could be defined as an ontology that postulates a social character to relations between humans and non-humans: the space between nature and society is itself social. Naturalism is founded on the inverse axiom: relations between society and nature are themselves natural. Indeed, if in the animic mode the distinction “nature/culture” is internal to the social world, humans and animals being immersed in the same socio-cosmic medium (and in this sense, nature is a part of an encompassing sociality), then in naturalist ontology, the distinction “nature/culture” is internal to nature (and in this sense, human society is one natural phenomenon among others). Animism has society, and naturalism has nature, as its unmarked pole: these poles function, respectively and contrastingly, as the universal dimension of each mode. This phrasing of the contrast between animism and naturalism is not only reminiscent of, or analogous to, the famous (some would say notorious) contrast between gift and commodity—I take it to be the *same* contrast, expressed in more general, noneconomic terms.³³ Likewise the distinction that I have made here between production/creation (naturalism) and exchange/transformation (animism).

In our naturalist ontology, the nature/society interface is natural: humans are organisms like all the rest—we are body-objects in ecological interaction with other bodies and forces, all of them ruled by the necessary laws of biology and physics. Productive forces harness, and thereby express, natural forces. Social relations—that is, contractual or instituted relations between subjects—can only exist internal to human society (there is no such thing as “relations of production” linking humans to animals or plants, let alone political relations). But how alien to nature—this is the problem of naturalism—are these social relations? Given the universality of nature, the status of the human and social world is unstable. Thus, Western thought oscillates, historically, between a naturalistic monism (sociobiology and evolutionary psychology being two of its current

33. “If in a commodity economy things and persons assume the social form of things, then in a gift economy they assume the social form of persons.” Chris A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London: Academic, 1982), 41, as cited in Strathern, *Gender of the Gift*, 134.

avatars) and an ontological dualism of nature and culture (“culturalism” and symbolic anthropology being two of its recent expressions).

Still, for all its being the polar opposite of naturalistic monism, the dualism “nature/culture” discloses the ultimate referential character of the notion of nature by revealing itself to be directly descended from the theological opposition between nature and the supernatural. Culture is the modern name for Spirit—I am thinking of the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*; or at least culture names the compromise between nature and grace. Of animism, I am tempted to say that the instability is of an opposite kind: there, the problem is how to administer the mixture of humanity and animality that constitutes animals, rather than, as is the case among ourselves, how to administer the combination of culture and nature that characterizes humans.

Amerindian perspectivism might be viewed as a radical polytheism (or rather, henotheism) applied to a universe that supports no dualism between created matter and Creator Spirit. I am led to ask whether our own naturalistic monism is not the last avatar of our monotheistic cosmology.³⁴ Our ontological dualisms derive ultimately from the fundamental difference between Creator and creature. Killing off the Creator, as some say we have done, has left us with a creature whose unity depends on the now-absent God. For God prepared science, and the transcendence of transcendence has created immanence.³⁵ This birthmark is visible on all modern efforts to dispose of dualisms. Our monistic ontologies are always derived from some prior duality—they consist essentially in the erasure of one of the terms or in the absorption (sometimes “dialectical”) of the erased term by the remaining one. A genuine monism, anterior and exterior to the great divide between Creator and creature, seems beyond our reach. A lesson we can usefully draw from Amerindian perspectivism is that the relevant conceptual pair may be monism and *pluralism*: multiplicity, not mere duality, is the complement of the monism I am contemplating. Virtually all attacks on Cartesian and other dualisms consider that two is already too much—we need just one (one principle, one substance, one reality). As far as Amerindian cosmologies are concerned, it would appear that two is not enough.

My problem with the notion of relativism, or with the opposition between relativism and universalism, pertains to the concept that underwrites such categories and oppositions: the concept of representation. And my problem with representation is the ontological poverty it implies—a poverty characteristic of

34. The question is also posed in Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, and in Marshall Sahlins, “The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology,” *Current Anthropology* 37.3 (June 1996): 395–428—to mention only two recent works of anthropology.

35. Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

modern thought. The Cartesian break with medieval scholasticism produced a radical simplification of European ontology by positing only two principles or substances: unextended thought and extended matter. Modern thought began with that simplification; and its massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions (questions of representation) is still with us. Every mode of being not assimilable to obdurate matter has had to be swallowed up by mind. The simplification of ontology has led to the enormous complication of epistemology. Once objects or things have been pacified—retreating to the exterior, silent, and uniform world of nature—subjects begin to proliferate and chatter: transcendental egos, legislative understandings, philosophies of language, theories of mind, social representations, the logic of the signifier, webs of signification, discursive practices, politics of knowledge, and, yes, anthropology of course.

Anthropology is a discipline plagued since its inception by epistemological angst. The most Kantian of disciplines, anthropology is practiced as if its paramount task were to explain how it comes to know (to represent) its object—an object also defined as knowledge (or representation). Is it possible to know it? Is it decent to know it? Do we really know it, or do we see it (and ourselves) through a glass, darkly? There is no way out of this maze of mirrors, mire of guilt. Reification or fetishism is our major care and scare: we began by accusing savages of confusing representations with reality; now we accuse ourselves (or, rather, our colleagues).³⁶

While philosophy has been obsessed with epistemology, ontology has been annexed by physics. We have left to quantum mechanics the task of making our most boring dualism, “representation/reality,” ontologically dubious. (Though physics has questioned that dualism only in the confines of a quantum world inaccessible to intuition and representation.) Supernature has thus given way to sub-

36. Polarities and other “othering” devices have had bad press lately. The place of the other, however, can never remain vacant for long. As far as contemporary anthropology is concerned, the most popular candidate for the position appears to be anthropology itself. In its formative phase (never completely outgrown), anthropology’s main task was to explain how and why the primitive or traditional other was wrong: savages mistook ideal connections for real ones and animistically projected social relations onto nature. In the discipline’s classical phase (which lingers on), the other is Western society/culture. Somewhere along the line—with the Greeks? Christianity? capitalism?—the West got everything wrong, positing substances, individuals, separations, and oppositions wherever all other societies/cultures rightly see relations, totalities, connections, and embeddings. Because it is both anthropologically anomalous and ontologically mistaken, it is the

West, rather than “primitive” cultures, that requires explanation. In the post-positivist phase of anthropology, first Orientalism, then Occidentalism, is shunned: the West and the Rest are no longer seen as so different from each other. On the one hand, we have never been modern, and, on the other hand, no society has ever been primitive. Then who is wrong, what needs explanation? (Someone must be wrong, something has to be explained.) Our anthropological forebears, who made us believe in tradition and modernity, were wrong—and so the great polarity now is between anthropology and the real practical/embodied life of everyone, Western or otherwise. In brief: formerly, savages mistook (their) representations for (our) reality; now, we mistake (our) representations for (other peoples’) reality. Rumor has it we have even be mistaking (our) representations for (our) reality when we “Occidentalize.”

nature as our transcendent realm. On the macroscopic side, cognitive psychology has been striving to establish a purely representational ontology, a *natural* ontology of the human species inscribed in cognition, in our mode of representing things. The representational function is ontologized in the mind but in terms set by a simpleminded ontology of mind *versus* matter.

The tug of war goes endlessly on: one side reduces reality to representation (culturalism, relativism, textualism), the other reduces representation to reality (cognitivism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology). Even phenomenology, new or old—and especially the phenomenology invoked these days by anthropologists—may be a surrender to epistemology. Is not “lived world” a euphemism for “known world,” “represented world,” “world real for a subject”? *Real* reality is the (still virtual) province of cosmologists, the theorists of quantum gravity and superstring theory. But listen to these custodians of real reality and it becomes obvious—it has been obvious, I might add, for more than seventy-five years—that at the heart of the matter, there is no stuff; only form, only relation.³⁷ There are “materialist ontologies” on offer as cures for epistemological hypochondria, but I do not know what to do with them. All I know is that we need richer ontologies and that it is high time to put epistemological questions to rest. No effortless strenuous and transformative and dangerously disorienting would make even disagreement with an animist warrior possible.

37. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1925; New York: Macmillan, 1948).